

A New Black Magic—And They Weave It Well

By CLAYTON RILEY

Entertainment Editor of *The Amsterdam News*

FLASH, as a register of Black American life, is style gone beyond; behavior and appearance taken past the perimeters of respectability, taken outside. Brother glitters on the weekend, gliding from his car to the bar with the original Temptations finger-popping in his brain, Sister cursing out whichever social worker, defiantly asserting both her right and her will to live, spectacular clothes and freakish shoes to match or not match, knowing how to use the word *fly* as an admiring adjective . . . flash—all flash.

Playwright and composer Melvin Van Peebles has pulled these visions together, set their flash to a very beautiful music and placed them onstage at the Ethel Barrymore in a dazzling theater experience called "Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death."

Out of a hideously effective set designed by Kert Lundell—a stark metal and mortar fortress rising above so many Black streets in the land—comes the nation's Blood to mention a few things in passing. Or, as one of the Brothers states it: ". . . lay a little top secret on you." You! Dig it? All right.

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So these people come out on the stage, you understand, and they sort of run down, see, the events of the days and nights they live. Doing so in tones, rhythms and colors both vivid and opaque. Offering brilliantly accurate documents of street lore and fantasy. Legends. Nigger mythology. Coupling rage and laughter, detailing joys among urban field hands, thieves, postal workers, sex workers, factory workers and the inevitable unemployed, and letting them specify what America is to a great many Black folks. The words and music are taken from two LP recordings made a year or so ago by Van Peebles (he spoke or sang all the roles himself). The text is comprised of 18 monologues, each an account and an event alternately naturalistic, then surreal.

At the start, a weary Black man enters, his feet ruined and aching. His pain derives as much, he tells us, from living in America as from walking (Continued on Page 13)

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in it. "If I walk slow," he explains, "I'm loiterin' . . . run; I'm escapin' . . . frown; I'm hostile, and grin, I'm a Tom. It just don't make no sense, the way these feet are hurtin' me."

* Suddenly, with the speaking of these lines, the audience is on the block, Inner City bound. For some, it is a journey close to home, for others, it's traveling to foreign soil, and for a few, it is—in the most contemporary meaning of the term—a trip. Before us the stage is a cosmos housing a very Black Magic, a place where an extending mojo, a spell, will be worked on us. And is.

High above that stage, a huge, grotesque white mask glows atop a human body the hands of which cast down a multi-colored array of puppet strings, each string taken up by the living Black processional that moves into view below. The figures in this processional speak, or let their silences form lyric definitions, registering all the while a ritual passage from joy to sorrow, rage to accommodation—round trip.

* And their declarations, despite what any urban scholarship may tell you, or whatever citations of disappointment have been recorded by many of this city's White drama critics, their declarations are mostly expressions of love. And it's possible for you to believe this. Unless you feel that love, affection, caring are the exclusive province of the extravagantly beautiful, the rich, or the ex-wives of dead Presidents. Those White critics who were offended by the show failed to mention that no call for Whites to feel guilty is ever made in it. What I think confounded many reviewers was that Van Peebles has written a show in which the players, all of them Black, express themselves in deeply moved and moving terms to other Black people. Some White critics seem to have the continuing and rather paranoid impression that any expression of love that does not mention Whites specifically is in fact

an expression of hatred toward them. Which is, finally, a very sad comment on the state of their emotional health.

* I believe in actress Gloria Edwards near tears in a high place (a bridge or fire escape?) shouting to a cop with what little tenderness her wrongdoing man has left her: "Take your hands off me mister / I ain't jumpin', I'm leanin' over . . . If I didn't leap when Medgar got your message / or Malcolm, or Martin Luther King / Take your hands off me / I ain't gonna do it now. . . ."

This piece, like all the others in the show, is best understood in the context of a jazz expression. It is a solo, soprano saxophone, piano moaning to the night, flute riffs.

* A Brother from way down home pleads with the woman who got to the city about the same time the city got to her: "I tried to tell you/ That all those old lights/Orange and green and so on/ They were here already/ Sugar when you got here/ They'll still be right here/ Baby when you gone. . . ."

Love impure, profane and cruel as well. A pimp beats his whore publicly, she responds by increasing her devotion to him. A cop, taking brutal humiliating advantage of a streetwalker in the back of a patrol car, tells her: ". . . smile Brown Sugar . . . nothin' gonna happen to you/at least nothin' new."

* Van Peebles has the words, these and many more, and he has, as well, the consummate artistry of director Gilbert Moses ("Slave Ship") whose vision, sense of theatrical movement and energy give the show a richly textured, rhythmic brilliance. As a giant drag queen seeks flesh to adore (" . . . is that smile, you did smile at me/condescending or real?") the entire cast glides/slides around him like a squadron of shuffling marionettes, in a spectacular example of Brother Moses' exceptional handling of a large company of players and six onstage musicians.

The cast is excellent. Cle-

bert Ford's portrait of a blind beggar's confused search for the mate of his dreams is a thoroughly magnificent elaboration of heart-break. Beatrice Winde, as a man-tailored lesbian, opens the second act calling from the street up to the window of her jailed lover ("Baby is you ever gonna come back and dance with me?"). The moment is shatteringly beautiful; Sister Winde deserves all praise. A number called "Lillie Danced the Zampoughi" features Garrett Morris recalling his love, who is brought to life by Barbara Alston in an awesome display of the particulars of human sensuality.

* Would that I could mention them all. Jimmy Hayson in two roles, a bad-mouthing wino ("You'll never be the man your maw was!") and a fast-talking middle-aged suitor, is splendid. In a wondrously understated piece, Albert Hall plays a postal worker turned assassin, a transfer no Black man in America should have trouble feeling as well as understanding. Says Hall: "Take all the grunts in a hog/take all the barks in a dog/take all the crumbs in a piece of cornbread/ and how come day break and don't fall/and night fall and don't break/and Blue Eyes can't be satisfied/unless his foot's up me. . . ."

* And Minnie Gentry is outstanding as an old woman in the show's finale "Put a Curse on You," a piece directed to everyone in the audience, Blacks included, everyone who sits by and watches the degradation extant in this country without becoming outraged and moved to action. "Put a curse on you . . . may all your children end up junkies too . . . your mammy trick by the pound to buy that ounce . . . Put a curse on you." It is a superb ending which indicts us all, no matter what the color of our skins.

Have the guts to see "Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death." Whether you're Black or White, a Sister, a Brother or an Other, it'll shake you in several directions.